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C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 002482

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E.O. 12958: DECL: AFTER KOREAN UNIFICATION  
TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [KS](#)  
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ROH MAGNANIMOUS ON US-ROK RELATIONS

Classified By: Classified by CDA Bill Stanton. Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)  
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Summary  
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¶1. (C/NF) In an August 16 Blue House meeting following the ceremony honoring Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Peter Pace, ROK President Roh Moo-hyun detailed the many positive advances in U.S.- ROK relations accomplished during his term in office, including the relocation of U.S. Forces, the Free Trade Agreement, and progress on Korean participation in the Visa Waiver Program. In language clearly intended to revise his reputation as less than friendly to the United States, Roh distanced himself from his own previous anti-U.S. rhetoric during the 2002 presidential election about the accidental deaths of two Korean schoolgirls struck by a U.S military vehicle, and said he had always doubted allegations about U.S. military responsibility for the 1980 Gwangju massacre. Roh expressed his fondness for President Bush, and eagerness to meet with POTUS on the margins of the upcoming APEC Summit. In addition, he conveyed his appreciation for U.S. contributions to establishing international order and peace across the globe, and contrasted the Korean mind set toward casualties overseas with American fortitude. Praising the efforts of General Pace and U.S. Forces to maintain peace in Korea, Roh said most Alliance issues had been solved and he hoped that the realignment of American forces would make the lives of our service members better. Noting that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MOFAT) and the Ministry of National Defense (MND) had supported the U.S. position on the return of U.S. bases, Roh also pointed out the criticism he had received from NGOs and the opposition of his Minister of Environment. End summary.

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An Improved Alliance  
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12. (C/NF) On August 16, President Roh Moo-hyun presented General Peter Pace, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with the Tongil Medal of National Merit for his service in support of Korea's security. Following the brief ceremony at the Blue House, General and Mrs. Pace, U.S. Forces Korea Commander General Bell, and the Charge sat down with President Roh and members of his staff for what was expected to be a brief chat but turned into an hour-long meeting as Roh privately reflected on the progress made across a wide range of bilateral issues.

13. (C/NF) Roh opened by expressing appreciation for all that General Pace and other U.S. military commanders had done for the security of Korea. Thanking President Roh, General Pace said he had accepted the honor the President had bestowed on behalf of all the U.S. service members who had been guests of Korea and served side by side with Korean forces. President Roh endorsed this view, adding that we should not forget all those who had served in Korea. We appreciate the U.S. forces in Korea, Roh said; they were important to Korea and continued to do a lot of good work. Roh said he sincerely hoped that the realignment and relocation of U.S. forces would make the lives of our service people better. Roh added that the previous day he had received a report on the preparation of the Jikdo aerial practice range, noting that when that particular issue was resolved in the near future, all of our military alliance issues would be behind us. General Pace responded that while there were always issues that might arise, we remained friends, allies and partners.

14. (C/NF) Reiterating his view that Alliance problems were behind us, President Roh suggested that unlike five years ago, when both the U.S. and the ROK shared great difficulties over the transformation of the U.S. military presence in Korea, now all the difficult issues between our militaries had been resolved. He recalled in particular in 2002, when he was a candidate for the Presidency, the "unfortunate incident" in which two Korean schoolgirls were killed (accidentally stuck by a U.S. military vehicle) and the subsequent debate over the relocation of U.S. bases. Roh said he thought it was safe to say that with the relocation of U.S. bases, there was very little basis for any conflict between U.S. forces and the Korean people. To get to this point, he said, U.S. military commanders had endured great difficulties and made enormous efforts. Roh added that while there had been and still were some Koreans who were critical of the U.S. and had targeted the U.S. military presence in Korea, the focus had now shifted to the import of U.S. beef and this had taken some pressure off the U.S. military. The beef issue was easier to deal with, he concluded with a smile.

15. (C/NF) General Pace responded that in a democracy, there were always differences of opinion but the value of the friendship between our countries was such that we would work hard to maintain the bonds that went back decades. Recalling that as a young lieutenant, he had served side-by-side with Koreans in Vietnam, the General said it was unfortunate when there were problems, but as good friends, we would always find solutions.

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Roh's Changed View of the Alliance  
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16. (C/NF) President Roh responded that he had to admit that at one time he thought the ROK-U.S. relationship was one-sided and that it meant more to Korea than to the U.S. He had the opportunity to visit the United States, however, and had been surprised and touched to find that our Alliance meant a great deal to Americans. He had also at one time felt that Koreans were fonder of the American people than Americans were of Koreans but he had found to the contrary that there was great affection in America for the Korean people. Especially when he had visited the Korean War memorial in Washington, he had been touched by those he met. Korean War veterans in particular had great affection for

Korea. They were followed by those who had had an opportunity to live and work in Korea.

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Roh Looks Forward to Meeting POTUS  
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¶7. (C/NF) Noting that he had met with President Bush at the beginning of the week, General Pace conveyed the President's best wishes. President Roh said he understood he would be meeting President Bush on the margins of APEC when they would have a great deal to discuss. "I like President Bush," he said; "he's very likeable." Over time, Roh continued, they had built a degree of trust between themselves as they worked together on many issues. Roh proudly speculated that among Korean presidents he had met the U.S. President more often than any of his predecessors. Together, he and President Bush had "completely revamped the Alliance." He cited in particular "taking care of the U.S. Embassy and Residence" (presumably a reference to our agreement to eventually move the Chancery and staff housing to land vacated on the Yongsan military compound); signing a Free Trade Agreement; and obtaining before the conclusion of President Bush's term of office the Visa Waiver Program for the Korean people.

¶8. (C/NF) Noting the hardships American troops were undergoing overseas, President Roh said he hoped they would soon have some success and reduce the pressure on President Bush. He said he understood President Bush's ongoing concerns for the troops and felt strong sympathy for him. General Pace responded that President Bush appreciated all that Korean troops were doing in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon. Although in some places we might not have had as much success as we would like, one place there was success was right here on the Korean peninsula.

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Praise for U.S. Fortitude in Contrast to Korea  
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¶9. (C/NF) Continuing his laudatory and reflective appraisal of the U.S.-ROK alliance, Roh said he believed the tremendous sacrifices U.S. forces had made overseas were very noble and reflected the great fortitude of the American people. He observed that he was not sure the Korean people had the same fortitude or resilience to make such sacrifices. If that were the case, he thought the difference stemmed from the different historical experiences of each country and the role each country had played in the modern era. Sharing more about the transformation of his own personal understanding of the Alliance and the U.S., Roh said he had had the privilege to visit the National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia and the Punchbowl in Hawaii. He recalled how struck he was that the vast majority of Americans had lost their lives overseas on behalf of other countries. He had found the same to be true when he visited the memorials to the fallen in Australia and New Zealand. Few had given their lives for their own nation. Most had died upholding the international order; this was very impressive. He thought the historical experience of a country accounted for the difference. The more pride a country had in the role it played on the international stage, the more fortitude the people had.

¶10. (C/NF) In Korea's case, Roh continued, some sacrifices had been made in Vietnam and some in Iraq, but there was a lack of popular consensus in support of Korean forces overseas. Even supporters of Korean deployments overseas attacked his Government when there was the slightest setback. The mind-set of the Korean people was such that they did not understand the value of their contributions to the international community. Nonetheless, Roh concluded, he believed that during his term in office there had been some improvement in the Korean outlook toward the U.S. and also in this Korean mind-set. In response, General Pace recalled that during his previous visit to Korea, he had visited the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. He said he knew of no more courageous fighters in the world than Koreans. Korean troops were making a contribution not only abroad but also right

here at home. The United States valued and appreciated their contribution, and we thanked them for the job they were doing.

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Improved Korean Views of the U.S.  
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¶11. (C/NF) Expressing appreciation for General Pace's words, President Roh said the thought had just occurred to him that the views of the Korean people toward the United States had improved with the growth of democracy in Korea. During General Pace's tour in Korea (in 1986-1988), Roh recalled that he had himself been in the human rights movement. Ruefully, he said, his friends at the time had strong anti-American feelings. His friends, however, had changed their minds over time and all now had favorable views of the U.S. Another unfortunate incident (in the history of U.S.-Korea relations), Roh said, was the mass killings in Gwangju in 1980 when pamphlets distributed at the time accused the U.S. of responsibility. At the time, he recalled thinking that there was no evidence to support these accusations. Nonetheless, he said, the Korean people now understood the U.S. military was not involved. General Pace replied that there were often misunderstandings but that thousands of Americans had died to free Korea and if necessary thousands more would die again to keep it free. As long as Korea wanted us to be friends and partners, we would be.

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Base Returns  
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¶12. (C/NF) Changing subjects, President Roh said our two countries enjoyed many channels of communication. When there were glitches, however, you would almost always see it in the press, which was always making trouble. Our governments were regularly in consultation and he believed there was a high level of trust and confidence in our sharing of sensitive information. Sometimes, Roh said, he even had to prod his people to be more aggressive in defending Korean interests. Sometimes he believed they took his instructions well, but sometimes not. He noted that on the issue of rehabilitating returned U.S. bases, he had had a hard time persuading his Environment Minister to look into this issue more thoroughly. Roh said he thought we would be pleased to know that MOFAT and MND had both served as good advocates of the U.S. position on base returns.

¶13. (C/NF) General Pace replied that he would take very seriously any Korean complaints about the bases we had returned and would be most anxious to clarify any misunderstandings. We had worked very hard to return the bases in the condition in which we would want them and had returned them in better condition than in which we had received them. Agreeing, President Roh said he understood very well the U.S. efforts to return the bases in good condition. Of course, he added, some people still claimed the Korean Government had been too lax on this issue. He fully understood that there were national differences in environmental criteria and regulations so he understood the basis of the disagreements. He hoped that when all the Korean inspections were over and done with, the Government would find the environmental condition of the former bases to be as reported by the Korean military and not as reported by the NGOs. Deputy Combined Forces Commander General Kim Byung-kwan, who also participated in the meeting, said he had been told the condition of the former bases was not bad, and the Korean military would take a look at any additional measures that were found necessary.

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Chancery Move?  
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¶14. (C/NF) Turning to the Charge, President Roh asked if we were ready to move U.S. Embassy facilities. The Charge replied that our building of a new Chancery and a move

depended in turn on USFK's move to Pyongtaek. General Bell added that the important thing was that we had an agreement to move.

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Comment  
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¶15. (C/NF) President Roh's comments were delivered to a select audience on an occasion honoring a key Alliance supporter and therefore cannot be assumed to be his true or final feelings about the U.S.A. What he had to say, however, alongside the helpful public statement of support for the Alliance contained in his August 15 Independence Day speech, provides further evidence he recognizes the U.S.-ROK Alliance is vitally important to the stability and prosperity of his country. That is a view we believe, and the polls consistently indicate, is widely shared by the Korean public. That said, it remains to be seen if his views expressed in private will translate to a less contentious transfer process during the next round of base returns in 2008.

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